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The Bounty

by [C. Minor](#)

"What the hell is wrong with you, Solo?" B'Gashi snapped, his face contorting into the mindless fury for which he was known so well. "You lost your nerve or what?"

"No!" Han protested. Even across a holo-link rather than an actual meeting, he felt his skin crawling under the intense scrutiny of B'Gashi's gaze. The henchman-cum-bounty hunter was infamous for his lethal combination of a quick temper, an obsessive mindset and his vast array of information sources. Once B'Gashi pegged you for punishment, there was no way to escape him short of crashing your ship on a planet that hadn't even spawned intelligent life and hoping to die within a year.

And the look B'Gashi was shooting at Han meant that his chances for becoming the next man on his death list were steadily climbing.

Han swallowed. "I just need a little time, B'Gashi."

"A little time?" the henchman spat. He was one of Jabba's most intelligent workers - anyone who automatically assumed the name 'henchman' translated into 'stupid' was deadly wrong when it came to B'Gashi. "You've had almost a year, Solo. You're on missions all the time, alone with her . . . how hard is it to put a blaster bolt between her eyes?"

"Come on," Han said. "I can't just take a little trip and come back with her mysteriously dead and not a scratch on me." "So slit your wrists," B'Gashi said uncaringly. "Look, Solo, I don't care how you do it, or what story you have to tell to do it, but if you don't have it done by next week I'll come out there and jump her myself!"

Han scrubbed his face with the palm of his hand, trying not to let his frustration show. "Uh, look, I can't have it done by next week. There's no missions for her scheduled, and besides, I've got to drop by Ord Mantell and take care of a payment someone owes me."

B'Gashi touched a thumb to the scar that adorned his face, running from eye to chin, considered for a second. He gave a sharp nod. "You've got one month. But this is the last extension, Solo. The last. If next time I call you, you haven't got a certain princess in a body bag for me, I'll send out someone competent to do the job. And I'll make sure they come after you first." The screen flickered, and B'Gashi's image faded to a pinpoint of light, then disappeared. Emotionally drained after the half-hour argument, Han collapsed into a chair in the comm room and rubbed his face with his hands. You really dealt yourself a doozy on this one, Solo, he thought. So much for grabbing the money and running. If he'd known who he was dealing with, he'd never had shaken that poor excuse for a human's hand in the first place.

As it was, he was marooned on some backwater base - what planet was he on, anyway? - stuck between a rock and a hard place, trying to juggle remaining emotionally distant around the princess and feeding B'Gashi enough truthful sounding excuses to keep from having to follow through on the deal. On top of that he was spending as much time around the princess as possible, wanting to be there on the off chance B'Gashi would come after her himself. He was losing sleep, losing weight, and he was beginning to jump at shadows. Another couple of weeks like this and the people around him would start to notice. He needed to fix this problem, and soon.

"Ugh," Han groaned to himself, a snort of resignation. He'd figure it out after he got back from Ord Mantell. Slapping his hands on his thighs, he stood up. He'd better go get the Falcon prepped.

"Captain Solo! Captain Solo!"

Han turned his head towards the sound, his neck protesting the sudden movement. He was wedged into one of the tiny access ducts under the belly side of the Falcon, a hydrospanner in his hand, a plasmawelder in his teeth and a laser cutter tucked behind his ear. Prepping the Falcon for take-off had suddenly become a rather lengthy process when the front landing strut stabilizer had shorted out, and for the past hour or two Han had been holding himself stiffly in the same crouched position while he tried to by-pass the burned out circuitry. The owner of the voice must have seen the toes of Han's boot dangling from the hatch, because a moment later Solo looked down to see General Riekaan looking up at him curiously. He smiled at the look on Han's face. "Having a bad day, Captain?"

Han scowled good-naturedly at him around the plasma welder and clambered out of the hatch. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes as he spoke. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I hear you're going to Ord Mantell today."

He'd said it way too casually for Han's liking. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What if I am?"

"Do you mind if we go inside?" Riekaan said, wrapping his arms around Han's shoulders and maneuvering him up the boarding ramp. It was done so smoothly it took Han a moment to notice that he hadn't actually been given any choice.

As they rounded into the lounge, Han whirled. "Okay, we're inside," he snapped. "Now what's this about?" The back of his mind reported that he was being a bit too short-tempered, but his recent conversation with B'Gashi had set him so far on edge that he was ready to believe everyone was out to get him.

"When are you leaving?"

Han forced himself to relax. He dropped into a navigation chair and fiddled with some of the settings. "Uh, well, I was meant to be leaving an hour ago, but my ship has other ideas . . . probably a couple of hours. Why?"

Riekaan took a seat opposite Han and leaned towards him, his elbows resting on his knees. "Because I want Princess Leia to go with you."

Han shot to his feet. "What? I don't think so. No way. Ord Mantell is no place for her." Not if I'm with her, he added silently. Especially not if B'Gashi's people are keeping tabs on me.

"It's an important mission - she's contacting rebel cells. We need a good cover. You've got one."

Han shook his head. "She can't come with me. It's too dangerous."

"Simply going to Ord Mantell is dangerous," Riekaan pointed out. "If she goes with you, and is caught, she actually has a real alibi. You're picking up a payment, aren't you?"

Han sunk back into his chair, wondering how he'd found out. Probably through Chewie. He was gonna stuff that damn Wookiee when he got back from patrol at Echo Four next week and hang him over the main entrance. "Yeah, a guy there owes me money I need for some parts," he said.

"Chewbacca won't be going with you." It was not a question.

"No. The guy who owes me has a certain, ah, aversion to Wookiees." Ever since Salporin ripped his arm off for taking a shot at Chewie he has, anyway.

"Then Leia can accompany you as your co-pilot."

Han grinned. "I don't think the Princess would make a very good smuggler," he pointed out.

"No," Riekaan agreed, "but she's a competent actress. She'll pull it off."

"And what's my part?"

"The usual -- transport to and from the rendezvous, protection, keep an eye out for anybody unwilling to follow the rules etcetera."

This is going to take a lot of hush-money, Han thought. With all the people who knew Han at Ord Mantell, he was going to have to dish out a lot of bribery cash. Han and a Wookiee was common. Han alone was less so, but not unheard of. Han and a new co-pilot, and a woman to boot . . . "I'd have to ask for more than the usual fee. I can't say why."

"Personal business?"

"You could say that."

"As long as it doesn't interfere with Leia's ability to carry out the mission. I'll give you a letter of resources."

"Sorry. Cash only. I'll need five thousand at least, and as much as you can get on top of that."

Riekaan raised his eyebrows. "In an hour? I probably can't do much better than six or seven thousand."

"I guess that'll have to do." He stood. "If that's all . . .?"

Riekaan stood up and shook Solo's hand. "Leia will give you the details," he said. Then he paused, raised his eyebrow at the younger man. "Are your personal affairs going to endanger Leia any more than the mission calls for?"

Han looked straight at him. He wouldn't lie to Riekaan - the guy had always been honest to him. "Yes," he said evenly.

"Ah." Riekaan chewed his lip thoughtfully. "Well, you're doing us a favor, Captain. I won't ask you to forgo your own agenda on top of what you've already agreed."

"Don't worry, I'll keep her safe."

"I know you will."

"I don't have a choice." Han grinned. "If I let her die, she'll kill me."

Han had only just finished his work on the forward strut, and was in the cabin shutting up the panels he'd been adjusting when he heard Leia come striding up into the Falcon. Her footsteps entered the cockpit a moment later, and he turned to make a quip about knocking first.

The sight of her rendered him speechless, and it wasn't often that Han was rendered speechless. She was dressed in a dark blue space suit that fit her so snugly she couldn't have possibly fit into it without help, artfully slashed in the middle to show off her midriff. A thick red stripe ran down the length of her body from her armpit, down the side of her leg, and disappeared into high cut, flat-soled spacer's boots. She'd tossed a black flight jacket over the top, a smaller but otherwise identical version to one that Han himself owned. A blaster was strapped to her thigh by a black leather gunbelt, and her hair swirled around her head in beautifully arranged chaos.

Han, for perhaps the first time around the Princess, grew a little self-conscious; he was covered in grease and sweat, and he'd stripped down to his white singlet to combat the heat he'd encountered in the belly of the Falcon. His recently cut hair stood on end from hours of having his hand run through it. And here was the Princess, looking as sexy as anything he'd ever seen, standing right in front of him. He felt like an idiot.

He didn't see the flash of attraction in Leia's eyes as he turned back to the pilot's console. He didn't consider the fact that Leia, having consistently being around diplomats and politicians, might be drawn to a man who found his living scrounging in the dirt, that she might love the rugged masculinity that accompanied the adjustment of a hyperdrive, or the manual hauling of cargo



from one storage bay to another. So he didn't realize it was the novelty of seeing him bare armed, grease-smearred and sweating that stopped her for a moment.

"You all right?" he asked, confused by her silence.

Leia blinked herself back to the present. "Um, yes," she said.

"You look good," he said, turning to face her. The dog tags he always wore around his neck - a remnant of his Imperial days - jingled against his chest as he moved.

Leia blushed and looked at her feet. "Thank you."

He looked at her bag. "That all you brought?"

Leia smiled at him. "I was under the impression that smugglers don't change their clothes too often," she teased, referring to his never-changing dress of white shirt, black vest, and dark blood-stripped pants.

Han grinned. "Touché," he said. He held out his hand for her bag, found himself staring at her stomach.

"Captain," Leia said softly.

Han coughed. "Uh, right. Sorry." Grabbing the bag, he brushed past her and into the main hold. "I'll put your bag in Chewie's cabin," he said. "Let's get you settled."

"I'm bored," Leia announced, tossing her hand of cards to the table in disgust.

Han glanced up from his own hand. "What?" he asked. "We've only just warmed up!"

"'Warming up' shouldn't take three hours," Leia snapped.

Han grinned. "You're just pissed because I keep winning."

"If this is all you ever do on this ship, I'm not surprised you beat me," Leia retorted, leaning back in her chair. "Ugh, don't you have anything else to do?"

"Yeah," Han said. "Sleeping. Or holochess."

"Please, no more holochess," Leia said, sounding as if she was going to throw up.

"Hey, its your choice," Han said, looking at his cards, apparently determined to continue with the game even though his only opponent had lost all interest. "Come on. Haven't you ever had to entertain yourself on a long flight before?"

"Not on a small ship," Leia said sourly. "And not at a subspace crawl, either."

"Hey," Han said, looking slightly offended. "I'm doing the best I can."

"I know." Leia smiled at him to show she wasn't mad. "It's not your fault we have to approach Ord Mantell at sublight. I just wish you'd told me."

Han gave her a pointed look. "It's an interdicted planet, Leia. How else do you think the Imps can keep tabs on everyone who comes and goes? I could always try a micro jump, I suppose, and get the sublights ripped out when they bring us straight back into realspace. That'd be about five seconds before they vaporized the hull. How's that sound?"

"I'm not angry or upset, just . . . bored!"

"So sleep."

"I'm too bored too sleep." She laughed at herself and wiped a hand over her eyes.

Finally, Han tossed his cards down and sat back in his seat, looking at her. He had his head cocked to one side the way he did when he was thinking creatively.

Leia had learned to be wary of that look.

"What?" she said carefully.

Han scratched his collarbone. "You wanna take her for a spin?"

"I - what?"

"The Falcon." He waved his hand at the walls of his ship. "We've got a little spare fuel and, like you said, we're in subspace, so if you want to stretch her legs, and as long as you keep the pointy end towards the planet, I don't mind."

It was a generous offer and she knew it. She just wished she could take him up on the offer. Unfortunately . . .

"I can't fly," she said, almost sheepish.

"What - not at all?"

"Of course not," Leia said. "I'm a princess, remember?"

"Oh." Han looked genuinely sorry for her. "I guess being royalty has its downfalls."

Leia frowned. Personally, she'd always considered being chauffeured everywhere to be the best way to travel. "Flying's that good?"

"Almost as good as sex." He grinned at Leia, knowing it would annoy her. "Unless you'd rather do that?"

Leia didn't even bother to answer that one.

"Come on." He nudged her arm with a fist. "You wanna have a go?"

"I'll break your ship. Not that there's that much to break."

"Nice. Come on." He didn't even give her a chance to argue; just stood up, grabbing her hand as he went.

"I'm really not sure about this, Han," Leia protested as he led her into the cockpit. She feebly tried to pull away from his grip, but wasn't really trying; she knew refusal only had two possible outcomes. The first was to lose her chance to fly the Falcon and go back to being bored to the brink of insanity. The second - and most likely - possibility, was that Han would just pick her up and dump her into the pilot's seat.

Sighing, she gave in.

Han didn't seem to notice her hesitation; he closed the cockpit hatch and started fiddling with the settings behind the navigator's seat. "Take Chewie's seat," he said.

He surreptitiously watched her as she sat, gingerly, but with that particular brand of defiant haughtiness in the face of the unknown that he'd always associated with her. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, afraid to touch anything, and Han almost chuckled at her stiff appearance.

She glanced at him. "I've got no idea what I'm doing," she said ruefully.

"That's a worry," Han said teasingly. "You're not doing anything yet."

Leia glared at him, then stared ahead out the viewscreen, hoping he wouldn't notice the amusement tugging at one corner of her mouth.

Han looked at her silently for a moment. "Well?"

"Well' what?"

"It ain't rocket science. Just put your hands on the controls."

"What if I push a button?"

Han sighed. "You're meant to push buttons. That's what makes her move." He stood looking at her in half-hearted irritation for a moment, hands on hips. When she still hesitated, he clucked in anger. "For crissakes, she's not going to bite you," he snapped, and reached over.

Leia went rigid as he reached into her lap and grabbed her by the wrists. Watch where you're putting those hands, mister!

He didn't seem to notice her body stiffen, and roughly dropped her hands onto the console in front of her. "See?" he asked, sitting in the pilot's seat and slapping his hands down too for good measure. "Nothing exploded."

"Small miracle," Leia muttered sarcastically, just quiet enough to be this side of understandable. Han squinted sideways at her, decided he wasn't going to figure out what she'd said, and scowled at her just in case it wasn't complimentary.

Leia glanced at him and had to smile. "So now what?"

Han flashed a grin at her - that toothy, unselfish one that always made her heart jump a little - and looked down at his board. "I'm going to take her off auto-pilot." He glanced at her. "Hold the wheel."

Leia carefully grasped the rudder. "Got it."

"Okay. You're co-pilot. I'm pilot. Switching over now." He clicked off the auto-pilot.

And proceeded to ignore her, as if she were an experienced flyer rather than a jittery first timer.

Carefully, Leia tugged the rudder, surprisingly heavy, to the left. The Falcon twitched in response, and Leia felt her face lit up. She pulled harder, and though the internal compensator equaled the gravity out, she could still feel the slight list as the ship banked majestically - the first time she'd used that word in conjunction with the Falcon.

She found herself beaming, glanced at Han, and he was grinning broadly back at her. "Like it?"

Leia just nodded, pulled the rudder back to the right, a little harder again, and the ship banked sharply.

"Pull it right over," Han's voice murmured into her ear. She did so, and to her absolute delight the ship flipped into a corkscrew, distorting the pattern of the starscape in the viewscreen. Having such finesse control over such a responsive creation was intoxicating, and Leia no longer wondered at the whoops and screams that drifted from the cockpit whenever Han decided to stretch his ships' legs.

After a few moments, she felt a tug on the rudder, and glanced over to see Han gently easing the Falcon out of its roll. "Don't want it getting out of control," he explained, still grinning. He studied her face and his grin became a little smug. "Well, princess, looks like you've been converted."

"I want to try again."

Han chuckled.

"Well, we're here." Han hurried out of the cockpit with his travel pack slung over his shoulder. "Let's not hang around."

Leia was already holding her bag and waiting at the top of the ramp as Han came in. He started keying in the access codes as the ramp lowered.

"Tell me again," Leia asked, leading the way into the oppressive Ord Mantell heat, "why we can't just stay on the ship?"

"It's an interdicted planet," Han said patiently, closing the ramp behind him and keying in the access codes. "Staying on your ship is the number one way to let the authorities know that you've got something to protect from them, and therefore something to hide. And despite what the ads say, this place is crawling with smugglers, petty thieves, ship dregs - you name it, they've got it. Which makes staying on your ship the quickest way to get tossed out of it. Plus it's a way of ensuring the tourists load all their spare credits into the accommodation system." He picked up his bag and started towards the main city center.

"Tourists?"

Han grinned sideways at her. "Oh yeah. You'd be surprised at the amount of tourists this place pulls in. Soft-shirt adventure seekers, most of them. Business men and honeymooners out for a little excitement and danger that isn't dangerous. They come over in some old rented space ship, wearing what they think smugglers wear and try to blend in for a few days. You can spot them at a mile, of course, but that doesn't stop them."

Leia chuckled. "And the real smugglers actually let them get away with it?"

"They don't just let them get away with it - they buy into it."

"Really?"

"It's a quick thrill. You find yourself a tourist, chase 'em down the street waving a blaster, maybe lift a few credits off them. They think it's real, and you get a laugh at their expense."

Leia quirked an eyebrow at him. "It sounds like you've been in the game more than once yourself."

Han shrugged, still grinning. "Me and Chewie have been known to indulge in a little tourist chasing." He laughed at some distant memory. "Although the experience becomes a lot more authentic when you've got eight hundred pounds of screaming Wookiee on your tail."

They cleared themselves at the spaceport - Han using the alias Rusty Aihara, and Leia with the newly forged I.D that identified her as Cayla Dorvak - and hit the dirty, dusty streets of Ord Mantell.

"So how many times have you been here, Han?" Leia asked, looking around at the lines of skyscrapers lining the dirty streets. Here and there evidence of an older culture showed itself in small out of the way restaurants and Tap-cafs.

"Don't look around," Han said. "They'll think you're a tourist and mug you."

Leia hid a smile and parodied his gait, staring seriously at her feet and jamming her hands into the pocket of her jacket.

She caught Han's attention, and he started laughing. "Watch it, Princess, or I'll give you a beating."

"You didn't answer my question."

Han glanced at her, shrugged. "Not too many smugglers worth their ship haven't been here at one point or another. I've got a few contacts here. A few people owe me favors. That's about it."

"It looks like a fairly decent place. Not clean, but decent."

Han laughed softly. "That's the tourist front, Princess. This place is as far away from decent as you can get without the Hutts getting in on it." He felt something damp splatter onto the shoulder of his jacket. He glanced up. "Starting to rain," he said.

Beside him, Leia grimaced. Between the heat and the humidity, getting wet was not something she was keen to do. "How far away is the hotel?" she asked. "Maybe we can make a run for it."

Han shook his head; clearly he had been thinking the same thing. "A good three kilometers at least," he said, squinting another drop of rain out of his vision. "But the rain normally passes quickly here - hits hard and fast. Let's find a doorway and wait it out."

He led her to the entrance to a small block of apartments, and they huddled in out of the rain. "It'll stop soon," Han said, glancing out at the sky. "It doesn't usually last much longer than this."

"How do you know so much about this place, Han?" Leia asked, peeking around him to see the sky for herself.

Han shrugged. "I lived out here for a while a few years back. I lost the Falcon to the authorities the second time I was here and ended up working in a bar for a couple of months while I found the fees to get her back," he said, but didn't offer any more on the subject. He stood in silence for a few moments, in the grip of an unspoken memory, and Leia watched his stony face with a mixture of awe, wonder, and sadness.

"Okay," he said, "I think it's starting to let up. Come on." He started out towards the street again.

And was stopped short as the business end of a blaster jabbed into his stomach. "What the --"

"Shut the fuck up," someone snapped, and Leia could see the outline of a short, barrel-chested man, jumpy with - stress? nervousness? - and red-eyed. "You Han Solo?"

Han was good. He had dropped his posture to that of a slightly bewildered young man who had never encountered anything more dangerous than a grumpy employer, and now the tone of his voice matched that character. "Me? My name's Rusty. Rusty Aihara." His voice took on a nervous edge. "We haven't done anything wrong, have we?"

The other smuggler spat a curse. "Don't gimme that shit. You're Han Solo."

Bemusedly, Han started digging through his bag. "No, my name's Rusty. Look, I have the proper identification with me . . ."

As Han bent over to search through his pack, the robber suddenly noticed Leia, who had been hidden by Han's frame. "Who the fuck are you?" he demanded.

Leia jumped a little at his curse and plastered a timidly optimistic look on her face. "I'm Cayla," she said. "I have I.D, too." She pulled it from her pocket and held it out for inspection. Han had found his after an appropriately fumbling search and offered it as well.

The robber took a long, hard look at both I.D's, then looked up at Leia, piercing her with his gaze. "What are you doing with him? You his whore?" Leia blinked and was almost ready to agree when Han slipped his arm protectively around her waist. She steeled herself not to jump, knowing that whatever Han had planned meant she had to be comfortable around him.

"She's my wife," Han said firmly.

"Really."

"Yeah."

With a smug half-smile, the robber flashed the two I.D's at Han. "Then how come you've got different last names?" he asked.

You've landed us in it, now, Solo, Leia thought.

And as usual, Han surprised her. Turning his head with a shy but proud smile, he kissed her softly on the temple. "We're newlyweds."

"Really," the other repeated skeptically. Leia could see that he wasn't convinced.

I'm going to regret this forever, she thought.

Turning her head, she kissed Han firmly on the lips. She felt his body tense with surprise and shock, but he lingered convincingly. Or maybe he wasn't actually trying to convince anyone. When he drew away, she thought she saw the stirring of something hungry in his eyes.

The robber was staring at them both, obviously unable to make up his mind. Finally he sneered. "Okay, Aihara. Gimme your bag."

Wordlessly, Han handed it over. "Excuse me -"

"What?"

Han jumped at the snapped comment. "I was - uh - just wondering if we could have our identification cards. Just so we can get off planet."

The robber snorted and tossed them to the ground at Han's feet. "I'll be watching you," he snarled. And with that, he turned, clutching Han's bag, and ran off down a side street.

Leia watched him go, then sighed and looked at Han. He took a deep breath, and as he exhaled, everything subservient left his body. He squared his shoulders, and abruptly, Han Solo again inhabited the body of the man she stood next to.

"Can't believe I fell for that," he said.

"Fell for what?"

Han waved his hand. "It's the oldest trick in the manual. You get an Artificial Weather Producer - the kind small time farmers use - and start a rain storm, box yourself a couple of suckers into a dry doorway with no escape route and relive them of their credits. It's fairly simple." He glanced at her. "So, Mrs. Solo," he said conversationally, "I wonder what we're going to do now. That guy just ran off with all our cash."

"Don't call me that."

Han grinned at her irritatingly. "Sorry, honey. Like that guy said, we're being watched. You are now my wife - at least publicly - until we get back off planet."

Leia scowled at him. "Why weren't you carrying the money on you?" she snapped.

Han raised an eyebrow at her. "Six thousand cash in my back pocket? I'd have been lifted three feet out the spaceport." He searched his pockets. "I have some emergency cash, but not a lot." He pulled out a few bills and showed them to Leia.

"I have two hundred on me," Leia said. "So that makes - what? A couple of meals and a hotel room, right?"

"Wrong," Han said. "We've got enough for a couple of meals, the Falcon's docking fees, and a comm call. Docking fees are another way to twist cash out of the tourists. Regulars don't usually have to pay them. Problem is --"

"You're not a regular," Leia finished for him.

"Exactly."

"What's this about a comm call?"

"That guy took off with all my bribery money. I can't keep this a secret anymore. Poof. No more diplomatic mission. Sorry. You'll have to cancel."

"Great. Now we're going to have to organize this all over again."

"Hey, if it makes you feel better, I can't pick up my payment either. When word gets out I'm broke he'll withhold payment cause he'll know I don't have any muscle to back up late payment threats."

"Even better. That means this whole trip was a complete waste of time."

"Seems like it."

Leia looked at the meager amount of cash in Han's fist. "So why don't we just leave?"

Han laughed. "Well, you see, that's another charming thing about an interdicted planet. You have to stay forty-eight hours before you can leave again. Makes it easier for them to keep tabs on traffic."

"You're kidding."

"Fraid not."

Leia wiped a hand over her eyes. The whole thing was verging on the ridiculous and Leia had the feeling that if she didn't calm down she would collapse in a giggling heap. "So what do we do?"

Han took her hand. "We call in a favor, Mrs. Solo. Come on."

"Come on, Madraias. Whatever happened to 'you have my undying thankfulness and servitude', huh?"

"I never said that, Solo, and you know it," Madraias said nervously, his eyes darting around the hotel lobby for the stormtroopers he expected to leap out at any second. They settled briefly on Leia, standing quietly in one corner of the room. "All I said was that I owe you one."

"Right. And I'm calling it in."

"You're asking too much."

Han slouched against the counter. They spoke in low tones for fear of attracting attention to themselves. "All I'm asking for is a room. One night." "You're asking

me to harbor two of the most wanted criminals in the Empire," Madraias hissed, leaning closer to Han. "I have to register everyone who stays here. You know that they're watching me. Especially after the whole Petali fiasco."

"Hey," Han said, putting on his best 'wounded pride' expression. "It was me who got you out of that fiasco in the first place." He straightened up. "One night. And you forget you saw me. That's it. I'm repaid. I need this one, Madraias. You have no idea."

Madraias looked at Han long and hard. Then he shook his head and sighed. "Okay, Solo. I guess I can put you into one of the basement rooms. I won't have to register you there."

Inwardly, Han winced. The only reason that Madraias didn't have to register the people that stayed in the basement rooms was because they were . . . well, the pleasure rooms of the whore houses that inhabited the area. They weren't registered because their inhabitants frequently only stayed a few hours. Leia was not going to be happy.

"That's great," Han said. "As long as it's got a strong front door and a lock."

"That it does." Madraias handed him a key. "Don't be seen. And for crying out loud, you better be out of there by clean up tomorrow, okay? Just leave the key under the pillow."

"Gotcha." Han flashed Madraias a grin. "Thanks, buddy."

Madraias gave him a harried half-smile in return. "Get outta here, Solo. I can't help you if they burn you down."

Han nodded and turned. "Come on," he said as he passed Leia.

She followed him out the lobby and into a turbo lift. "What was all that about?" she asked. "I thought you were getting us a room."

"I did get us a room," Han pointed out, stabbing a button on the control surface. The doors hissed shut.

"Then why did you have to browbeat him into letting us stay?"

"It's a little more complicated than simple payback. And keep your voice down."

"What was the whole Petali thing?"

Han glanced at her. "I thought you were above eavesdropping."

Leia smiled. "Not that far above. What happened at Petali?"

The doors in front of Han slid open, revealing a dark and grimy corridor. He studied the directions on his key and started down. "Nothing. Petali isn't a place. It's Madraias' daughter."

"His daughter?"

"Mmm-hmm. Apparently the Imperial governor here has a thing for young blond girls. Decided to make Petali his own personal . . . ah . . . secretary."

"I see. Where do you come into this?"

Han shrugged. "I convinced him otherwise."

"How'd you manage that?"

"I'd prefer not to talk about it. It got kind of messy. Ah, here's our room." He pushed open the door and gestured for Leia to enter first.

Leia stuck her head in the door first, took a cautious look around. Bed. Small table. Holo-box. Bathroom. "Lovely," she said sarcastically.

"It's a room," Han said optimistically. He walked in, pushing Leia ahead of him. "What else do you want?"

Leia took in the drab walls, bare dirty floor, the one lightbulb flickering heroically in the ceiling, and grinned at Han. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

Han smiled sheepishly. It was fairly obvious she had figured out what this particular room was used for. "It's the best I could do."

"Really, Han." She smiled up at him gratefully, but there was no mistaking the amusement twinkling in her eyes. "It's beautiful. The honeymoon suite. I'm so happy!" Giddily, she swooned onto the bed, which creaked alarmingly at the added weight.

Han chuckled. "Only the best for my wife," he said. "Now how's about that comm call?"

Leia's mood changed dramatically, and she sat up, hugging the pillow to her. "Oh, that," she said, irritated.

"There's a booth around the corner." He held out a few spare credits to her. "You won't be able to talk long."

"I won't be long. I only have to register my failure."

"You didn't fail."

Leia paused, her hand hovering over his, and pierced him with her gaze. "What is it about our current situation," she asked, "that makes you think I haven't?"

Han gave her a look that she couldn't decipher. "You think too little of yourself, Princess," he said quietly.

And then she realized the look on his face.

He was sad for her.

"You feel sorry for me," she said flatly.

Abruptly Han realized she was going to take his statement the wrong way. "Hey, I -"

"Where the hell do you get off thinking that you have to prop me up?"

Han searched for words for a moment. "I never -"

"You don't know anything about me."

Han swallowed. "Leia -"

"You're a smuggler. What would you know about success?"

That closed Han's mouth. He took a deep breath. His eyes were sorrowful.

Leia found that she couldn't hold his gaze. "Just give me the money," she muttered, dropping her eyes from his. Han pressed the credits into her hand, along with the key. "Be careful," he said.

She didn't answer, but turned and stalked out, slamming the door behind her. Han stood watching the door, chewing his lip, something difficult in his gaze.

* * *

She let herself back in the room ten minutes later.

Han looked up from where he was sitting on the bed, hair tousled and damp, a towel wrapped around his waist. Steam drifted from the open bathroom door. His clothes were tossed over the single chair. The holoivid in the corner was on, but Han paid it no attention. A lit cigarette dangled, ignored, from his fingers.

"I'm sorry," Leia said from the doorway.

"Close the door."

Leia closed the door quietly, locked it, and turned back. "I'm sorry."

Han was fiddling with a corner of the bed cover. He kept his gaze fixed on the wall. He swallowed, holding something painful tightly in check. He didn't answer.

"Han?" She dropped the key onto the table. "Han, please talk to me."

He didn't look at her. "What for?"

Leia almost grimaced at that. She really had hurt him with that last argument. "Please."

"There's nothing to talk about." He shrugged fractionally. "You're right."



The Bounty
"I was wrong. I was angry. I shot my mouth off ..."
Leia StarSky

"Han -"

"You're right," he repeated, drawing on his cigarette. "I'm a smuggler. What would I know?"

Leia sighed and sat down gingerly next to him. He didn't shove her off the bed, but he turned his head away.

"I was wrong," Leia said quietly. "I was angry. I shot my mouth off. I didn't mean what I said, and I'm sorry."

Han said nothing for a long time. Then he stubbed out his cigarette and stood up, leaving her.

"I'll sleep in the chair," he said.

A gentle but insistent hand on her shoulder woke her up.

Leia tried to crack her eyes open, but she didn't get very far. "What?" she mumbled, half asleep. Something in the back of her mind reported that she had to get up, had to get up now, but the comforting blanket of her dreams was warm and inviting.

"Come on, Princess," was the murmured reply. "We gotta go."

That sounds just like Han, Leia thought drowsily. She started to pull the blanket back up to her neck, and closed her eyes, easily falling back into the restful pattern of her slumber.

The gentle hand slid under her chin, moving her head around. "Princess."

Leia 'mmm'd in reply, shifting a little. It's too early. When I wake up I'm going to scream at Han for invading my dreams... "Go away," she mumbled. The palm rested against her cheek for a moment, and she thought she heard Han's voice chuckle. Then it stroked across her forehead, and reluctantly, Leia opened her eyes.

Han's face grinned down at her. "Morning."

In a flash, Leia remembered where she was, and sat bolt upright. "I'm up."

As she rose, she saw Han was fully dressed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. But we gotta get out of here before this place gets inspected." He handed Leia her jacket and boots.

"What's the time?" Leia asked, yawning as she shrugged into her jacket.

"A little before five."

No wonder I'm tired.

Han cracked the door open and glanced through it. "Looks okay," he murmured, shouldering their bag and stepping through. "Try not to make too much noise, we don't want to wake anyone up."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," Leia muttered, following him out the door. Keeping her head down, she matched his stride.

Han glanced at her. "For crying out loud, can you at least try to look like we're not doing anything wrong?"

She glared at him sideways. "It's your fault we're even doing this."

"Right." He reached the turbolift and pressed a button, waiting for the hiss of the doors.

"Where are we going?" The doors slid open, and she squeezed in ahead of Han. "We've still got a day before we leave and we've got no money."

"Well, we gotta get our hands on some cash, then," Han said.

"And how do you propose we do that, Captain?"

The doors hissed open in front of him. "Well, we need money for food, accommodation, and those docking fees -" he bumped into a tall trench-coated human as he edged out the lift - "sorry buddy, and we also know we've probably got at least one fringe group watching us and no friends here anyway that we can contact without blowing cover, so the best thing to do--" He lifted an unfamiliar wallet and grinned, "--is not to let anyone know what we're doing."

"Where'd you get that?" Leia hissed, even as her brain reported pick-pocket and she remembered the man he'd just bumped into.

"Shh," Han warned, opening the wallet and rifling through it as he walked. He found the credits, pocketed them, and casually tossed the wallet into the next trash can they passed. "You'll give us away."

Leia stopped, grabbing the sleeve of his jacket. He ground to a halt and glared. "What?"

"I'm not going to be part of this."

"Part of what?"

"Stealing." She waved her hand in disgust.

Han leaned against the side of a decrepit building and sighed. He should have known. "If you've got a better idea, I'd like to hear it."

"We could work -"

"We'd never get a job in time."

" - or we could gamble -"

"We got nothing to play with."

" - or sell our belongings -"

"We've got no belongings." Han waved his hand impatiently. "We've got an empty rucksack and the clothes on our back, and I'm not about to go walking around naked for your morals, princess."

Grimacing, Leia had to concede. Han was right. There were only a few other ways Leia could think of that would get her back to the Rebellion on time, and they were all more likely to wind up concluding with the unpleasant words capture and execution.

"Okay," she said. "But I'm not happy about this. And I'm not taking part in it."

They entered the dingy fourth rate dive with the bare minimum of cash in their pockets and in the middle of a full-blown argument.

"I don't believe you managed to do that," Han fumed, tossing his bag to the floor. "I don't believe it."

"You're the one who got those bodyguards furious at us when you lifted them."

"I didn't know they were bodyguards when I did it," Han snapped irritably. "And anyway they wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't dropped their wallets right in front of them."

"You wouldn't have been arrested if you hadn't assaulted the cop."

"I did not 'assault' him. I scuffled with him. And he started it."

"You knocked him out cold! While his back was turned!" Leia slammed the door shut. "I'm the one who got you out of trouble."

"You're the one who got me in trouble in the first place!"

"By coming up with a legitimate story for carrying that much cash between us?"

"You said you were a prostitute! Did you even know that prostitution is illegal here?"

"Why would I have known that?" Leia snapped.

"It's an interdicted planet!" Han screamed. "Everything is fucking illegal!"

They glared at each other, hands on hips. Then Han's face shifted minutely, and a moment later he was chuckling at the absurdity of the situation. Leia tried to hold her scowl, but found Han's laughter contagious. She covered her mouth and looked at the ground, determined not to let Han get the better of her, but he noticed anyway and started laughing harder. She ended up giving in, her choked-off laughter coming across as a collection of grunts and snorts, which resulted in Han collapsing onto the bed in a fit of giggles.

"Okay, okay," Leia said finally, catching her breath, attempting to calm the situation. "We need to take stock. What do we do now?"

Han wiped a hand over his face, chuckled for a moment longer, and rolled onto his stomach. He pulled the small amount of money they still carried from his pocket and sifted through it.

"How much have we got?"

"After that cops' fining spree?" He snorted, tossing the bills on the mattress in front of her. "Enough. But barely. I hope you're not hungry."

"No," Leia lied, silently begging her stomach not to start growling. Han studied her for a moment, then reached into his vest pocket and tossed her a small, stale ration bar. "You know, for a diplomat you're a pretty bad liar."

"I fabricate better after a meal." She tore the wrapper off and took a bite, chewing determinedly on the dehydrating mouthful of wheat and sugar. "So now what? We stay here for the night, make it back to the ship tomorrow?"

"And blast of this worthless rock. Yeah, that's the plan." He yawned, rolled over on his back, and shut his eyes. "Hyperdrive'll probably break or something."

Leia batted him gently on the arm. "Shhh. You'll jinx us."

Han opened one eye at her - she couldn't figure out whether or not it was a wink - and grinned. "Superstitious, Princess?"

"Converted. I don't think there's anything that hasn't gone wrong on this trip." She passed him the remainder of the ration bar. He must have been hungry because he took it without protest. She studied the bare mattress. "Going to get cold tonight without blankets."

"I'll go get some sheets and stuff from reception. There might be some in the closet."

Leia stretched. "I need a shower."

Leia gingerly stepped out of the bathroom, placing her bare feet down carefully on the floor. She was wearing Han's shirt as a makeshift nightgown. She set her own clothes down on the room's single chair, yawned, and checked to make sure the hem of Han's shirt stretched down far enough to cover her properly.

As she turned, Han straightened from the edge of the bed and tucked the last corner in. He swept his hand towards it, admiring his handiwork. "There. Pretty, huh?"

Leia favored him with a wry grin. "You didn't tell me you could make beds. Impressive."

Han raised an eyebrow at her. "Well, I hate to brag . . ."

"Liar."

". . . but it's one of my many talents."

"I almost hate to mess it up." She carefully pulled back the covers and crawled in. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Han said.

He stood there, his hands on his hips.

Leia turned her head slightly and glanced at him.

"Well?" Han asked.

"Well what?"

"Well - move over."

Leia raised an eyebrow and laughed disbelievingly. "I don't think so. You're not sleeping in the same bed as me."

"Why not?" Han asked. "There's enough room. Shove over."

"No way, mister."

Han stared at her for a second, then glanced around the room disbelievingly before bringing his gaze back to hers. "Well, where am I supposed to sleep, then?" he asked.

Wordlessly, Leia gestured to the floor.

Han looked down at his feet, then back up at the Princess. "I'm not sleeping on the floor," he said flatly.

"Why not?"

His gestures starting to get really big now, he indicated the room around them. "Have you noticed where we're staying? I'll catch a disease."

"A disease."

"Don't look at me like that. If I get sick we're both fucked and you know it."

They glared at each other for a moment, each silently testing the other. Finally, Leia sighed and rolled over. "Just for the record, I want you to know that I'm against this."

"Just be thankful that I'm not insisting we play married couple off camera, too."

"I am forever in your debt," Leia said dryly. She stared at the ceiling for a while, then murmured, "How long have you and Chewie been rattling around together?"

Han rolled his eyes, moulding his hands around the back of his head. "Can we not do the pillow talk confidante thing?"

"Sorry. I'm curious. And you're stuck with me, unless you want to sleep on the floor."

Han tilted his head to give her an amused but irritated look.

He didn't volunteer any information, but she persisted. "How long were you in the army for?"

"I wasn't in the army."

Leia focused on the dog tags around his neck. "Then why do you wear them?"

Han covered the tags with his hand uncomfortably. "They're from when I was in the Navy."

Leia cut through his lie quickly. "Pilots don't wear dog tags."

Han took a deep breath and let it out with a slow grin. "You never give up, do you?" He scratched behind his ear. "I pulled a couple of years. I transferred to the Navy after my platoon got wiped out."

"Why?"

Han thought about the answer for a moment. Finally he shrugged. "When someone dies in space you don't see 'em bleed," he replied simply.

The expression on his face was one of deeply hidden pain, and he looked so vulnerable, just for a moment. Leia felt herself moving - no, being pulled - towards him. Her foot brushed against his leg.

Han yelped. "Gah!" He slapped her foot away. "Cold!" He retreated further into his side of the bed, pulling the covers around him.

"You wimp," Leia said disdainfully.

Han rubbed his leg where she'd touched him. "You're like a block of ice! Stay on your side."

Leia rolled her eyes and pulled some of the covers back. There was a brief skirmish over who got the most blanket, which Leia won when she threatened to attack him with her cold fingers.

Han felt something cold press against his cheek, and brushed it away. Half asleep, he shifted lazily, and Leia wriggled next to him, murmuring in her dreams.

Settling again, Han sighed drowsily, shifted his shoulder a little further under the blankets.

The cold something pressed against his cheek again. Irritated, still barely conscious, Han moved to brush it away again.

"Wake your dumb ass up, Solo," a voice growled in his ear.

That got his attention. Han was alert and moving in a second, throwing the covers back, but B'Gashi had him by the hair before he could make it out of the bed, and dragged him to the ground. Han covered his head with his arms instinctively as he crashed to the floor. Goosebumps exploded on his flesh as the cold night air bit into him.

Disorientated, Han tried to scramble to his feet. A swift tug on his scalp and kick to the ribs sent him straight back down again. Another hand grabbed him, pressed his back against the wall. "Don't you fucking move," B'Gashi snapped.

Han shook his head, clearing his vision. It took a moment for his sleep-fogged brain to comprehend what was happening around him. Behind B'Gashi, Leia sat up groggily, rubbing her eyes, a half-furious scowl on her face.

Han tried to rise again, and B'Gashi pushed him back against the wall, pressed the muzzle of his blaster against his arm, and pulled the trigger.

Han would have guessed something like that might happen, but that knowledge didn't prevent a low groan escaping from the back of his throat as a flash of pain shot into his chest.

Behind B'Gashi, Leia sat wide-eyed, disorientated, and murmured uncertainly, "Han?"

Han opened his mouth to scream at her to get out, to run, but B'Gashi had turned and fired into her shoulder before either of them had time to move.

Han yelled, even as his mind registered stun bolt, and jumped to his feet.

It was, he found out a moment later, the perfect height for B'Gashi's fist to make hard contact with his throat.

The deck under her was cold. She thought. It may have been. She was fairly sure her cheek was pressing against it. One side of her forehead too. The air was warm and slightly damp, as if too many people had slept in one room and forgot to leave a window open. □ She shifted her shoulder experimentally, and something squeezed her fingers.

She cracked an eye open, looked at her hand, and saw it was being held by her other hand. Wait - no, that hand was too big, too brown, to be hers. She trailed her eyes up the strange arm to see who it belonged to, but lost interest by the time she hit the elbow.

Maybe she'd just ask who it was. She rolled her tongue around in her mouth, found it was full of cotton wool, and decided she'd wait for it to clear before she said anything.

Another hand - it looked similar to the one holding her fingers, so maybe they were attached to the same body - cupped her chin, tilted her head away from the floor. Her closed eyes met a sudden beam of light as she faced the ceiling - glow panel? - and she wrinkled her nose in irritation.

"Turn them off," she murmured.

There was a soft chuckle above her head. "Sorry, sweetheart, but I don't have a whole lot of control over the matter."

Dammit, why is he always there when I wake up? She cracked a lid open and caught an eyeful of glare from the panel, groaned and rolled over. Her shoulder felt funny and she probed it with a finger. Felt tender. Stun blast.

She was starting to remember just what had happened in her final moments of consciousness and sat up, rubbing her head.

"How are you feeling?"

Leia sucked on her tongue, trying to ease that furry feeling that came after three days without brushing once. "How long have I been out?"

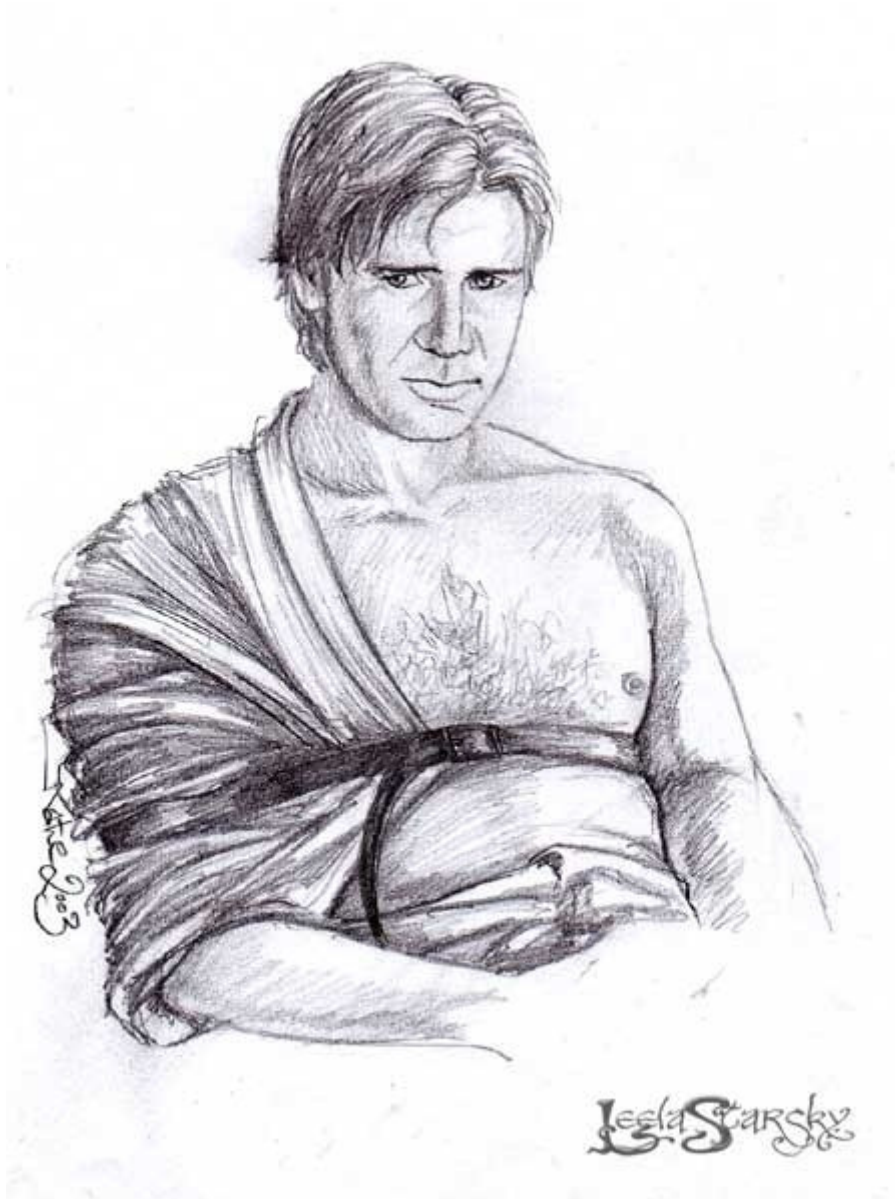
"Dunno. They took my watch. A while." He was wearing an old one-piece shipboard jumpsuit, pulled up to the waist with the chest and arms dangling behind him as he sat cross-legged on the floor. He'd wrapped his old shirt around his arm and had strapped it against his chest with a belt.

"You okay?" She ran her hands through her hair, noticed she was wearing the same jumpsuit. The same size as Han's, it sagged and bunched around her. She pushed her sleeves up to her elbows.

Han shrugged. "I'll live." He shifted a little, winced, and scowled. "Dammit."

"Has anyone treated you?"

"Yeah. Me."



She looked around their room - bare metal floor and walls, no windows, one door - and sighed. "No way out?"

"Tried to hotwire the door."

"And?"

"It zapped me. We're in a ship anyway; wouldn't do us much good even if I could get us out." He shook his head. "We came out of hyperspace about two hours ago, near as I can tell. I think we'll be setting down somewhere soon."

"Any idea where we are?"

Han shrugged. "We can't have gone far. A day's hyper either way. That puts us at Ansion or Vortex. Maybe Adumar, but I wouldn't put money on that. Either way we're a fair way out from friendly territory."

Leia's stomach growled. "You know who it is?"

He glanced at her. "Yeah. Bounty hunter. Name's B'Gashi. He works for Jabba."

"So this is about you not paying Jabba off?" she demanded.

Han glanced at her, an unreadable expression on his face. He didn't make eye contact. "Something like that."

Unfortunately for Han, he'd used his unreadable expression enough around Leia for her to assign an emotion to it. Fear. "What is it?"

Han made a face and scratched his foot, didn't answer.

"Han."

"Doesn't matter."

She studied his face skeptically. "I think it does." He looked up, and the look on his face was ... haunted? Like he'd done something terrible that he couldn't see an easy way out of. "Come on, you're worrying me now. What is it?"

Han scrubbed a hand over his face. "He paid me off."

"To do what?"

"It's not important."

"It is. For crying out loud, Han, tell me."

Han's jaw worked silently for a moment - building up his courage, Leia realized - before he met her gaze. "You."

"He paid you for me?"

Again his jaw moved wordlessly. "For part of you."

And abruptly, Leia understood.

"How much?" she asked coldly.

"Leia -"

"How much?"

Han winced. "Twenty thousand. Half up front."

"Twenty thousand." She felt her skin crawl. He would take her life for that amount, and he'd offered Luke and Ben passage, she knew, for seventeen.

"That's what I'm worth? Twenty thousand?"

"I never planned to do anything."

She cut him off with a sharp motion of her hand. "Bullshit, Han."

Han flinched. In all the time he'd known her, he'd never heard her swear. He opened his mouth to apologize, to explain, but she cut him off again. "I don't care if you were planning to do it or not. You told him you would for twenty thousand credits. You bartered my life for that. You shook his hand for it. You shook his hand, didn't you?"

"I -"

"Shut up. I don't want to hear your excuses. I don't want to hear your voice."

Han reached out a hand to her placatingly, and she recoiled, skirting into the opposite corner. "Don't touch me."

And that was that. What could he say to make it better? What did you say to someone when they knew how much you valued their life? What did you say when they knew, or thought they knew, that you'd hand them over for that value stamped on a chit card?

Nothing.

Han swallowed at that thought, and the door slid open behind him. A hand clamped down on his bad shoulder, and Han cursed as he was hauled to his feet. He whirled, snarling at his captor, and the crewmate slammed a fist into his gut. It was an effective way to calm Han down, and as he doubled over with a faint moan, he saw Leia watching coldly from her position on the floor.

"Boss wants to see you," the crewmate snapped gruffly, and dragged him out of the room.

Han was shoved in front of B'Gashi, who was smoking the last of Han's cigarettes and looking particularly amused at his captives' state of health. "How you feelin', pal?" he asked. His question was punctuated by a swift punch to Han's injured arm.

Han grunted and swallowed a yelp of pain. He would not show weakness in front of B'Gashi. If there was one thing he respected, it was at least the pretence of bravery. He forced a grin onto his face. He didn't answer. B'Gashi studied Han for a moment, his head tilted to the side curiously, like a small child studying an animal he had not before come across. Finally, he flicked his cigarette at Han. Han forced himself not to flinch as it bounced harmlessly off him. Mostly harmlessly. He could feel the sting of a tiny burn as it made its presence felt on his stomach.

"Tell me," B'Gashi said, sitting back in his chair and pressing the tips of his fingers together, "why I shouldn't kill you right now?"

Han didn't bother answering. If there wasn't a reason for him to be kept alive, he wouldn't be alive. "What about Leia?"

"What about her?" B'Gashi waved a hand casually. "We both know her fate. Jabba wants her alive now for some reason. I expect he's decided she's pretty enough to have the honor of being chained to him for a while before he feeds her to his pet." He shook his head with a chuckle. "I'm interested in you. You're worth quite a bit yourself, you know."

"Jabba would never let you kill me." For once, he was thankful to be bound to that poor excuse for a sentient. One of Jabba's hobbies was to kill his betrayers personally, and he got notoriously upset if someone else did the honors.

"Maybe not. But I'd be just as happy watching."

"So you're playing delivery boy today?"

That had the desired effect, if not an entirely intelligent act on Han's behalf. B'Gashi's face flushed an angry red. He kept his temper in check, but it was obvious he dearly wanted to smear Han all over the bulkhead. His hands clenched into fists around the arms on his chair, and he levered himself out of his seat a little. "Just watch yourself, Solo. You're not upping your chances any."

"What does it take to up my chances?"

B'Gashi sat back down. Han wasn't begging yet, but he was well on the way. And, everyone knew, B'Gashi loved when people begged. "Interest me."

"What did Jabba pay you for me?"

B'Gashi didn't answer. He looked at Han expectantly.

Han did some quick mental calculation. He'd been offered twenty thousand, and what with extra expenses and tracking fees--

"Fifty thousand?" B'Gashi gave no indication that Han was right, but he didn't say he was wrong either, so Han plunged ahead. "I can get you more."

At that, B'Gashi laughed. "Can you."

"One hundred."

B'Gashi's eyebrows quirked. "Okay, you've got my attention. How are you gonna get your hands on that amount of cash?"

"People owe me favors. And the Rebellion pays well. If you give me two weeks, I can get it." It was a lie that Han could scrounge that amount of money in two weeks, but Han would never be able to scrounge that amount of money, so it was a moot point. It didn't matter. All that mattered was getting himself and Leia away alive. He could worry about details later.

He tried to ignore the fact he'd probably just signed his death warrant.

B'Gashi thought, then shook his head. "Tempting, but I'm meant to bring the Princess back."

Han's mind raced. "She'd be better off left with the Rebellion."

Again the disbelieving laugh. "How, exactly?"

"The Empire want her. They want her bad. And they've been sending out ships for her. If she's with you, that's where the ships'll be too. The less heat on you, the better, right? My advice would not be to snatch the head of the Rebellion."

B'Gashi tapped a forefinger against his cheek. "You make a convincing case. Unfortunately, you haven't given me much reason to trust you. I want security." He considered, then smiled. "The codes to your ship."

"The Falcon?" Han's heart leapt into his throat.

B'Gashi's temper abruptly flared. "You got anything else worth my time?" he snapped. "I'm not a fucking idiot, Solo, so don't treat me like one." He stood, grabbed Solo, and dragged him to a computer console. Pulling Han up sharply in front of the screen, he turned it on. "Call her."

Most Corellian ships had remote capability, a failsafe that enabled pilots to track and monitor their ships, and the Falcon was no different. Hesitantly, Han keyed in the access, and brought up the Falcon's mainframe.

B'Gashi slid a datacard into the computer's socket. "Pull the codes," he instructed. He watched Han with a steely glare, and reluctantly, Han downloaded his ships' codes onto that little disk.

He almost refused. But Leia was sitting in that room, captive, and that was his fault. He'd already told her, in so many words, that he would turn her over for twenty thousand credits. Could he go back again and tell her he valued his ship more than her?

He transferred the codes, a bad taste in his mouth, and handed them over.

B'Gashi took the disk, turned it in his fingers, and pocketed it, a satisfied smile on his face. Then he shot Han a glare. "If you even think of changing the codes I'll track you down and blow you out of the sky." He fiddled with the safety on his blaster to prove his point.

"I understand."

"You've got two weeks."

"Just let us go."

Leia glanced up as the door hissed open. Han stood, framed by the door outline, dressed again, a slight bloodstain where his shirt had been wrapped around his arm. Leia fixed him with an icy glare, but Han barely noticed. He tossed her an armful of her clothes. "Get dressed," he murmured, his face blank, and turned to face away from her, slapping the door shut as he did so. Leia dressed quickly and quietly, acutely aware that Han was only a few feet from her. She waited until she'd fastened her jacket before speaking. "What's going on?"

Han wouldn't meet her gaze. "They're letting us go," he mumbled dejectedly, and palmed the door open again, striding from the room.

Leia trotted after Han, two steps for every one of his, determined to wrest the whole story from him. "Why?" she asked, looking up at his face. He stared stonily at his feet as he walked, and Leia could tell by the way he was walking that they were being watched from all corners as they made their way to the Falcon.

A door slid back before them, revealing a dirty and neglected hangar. The Millennium Falcon, for once looking like it belonged in its surroundings, waited

patiently with the boarding ramp lowered. Han strode up it, slapping the panel to start the boarding ramp closing as he did so. Leia had to quicken her step to avoid being clipped by the outer hull.

Han stalked into the cockpit, threw himself into his chair and started prepping his ship for takeoff. Her face set with a profound fury, Leia followed him in.

"What the hell is going on?" she demanded.

"What's going on is that I'm getting us out of here," Han said stonily, reaching behind him to turn on the pre-thrusters, and in doing so managing to avoid her gaze completely.

"Why did he let us go?" Leia asked. She slid into the co-pilots seat, did up her belt.

Han flicked switches and didn't look at her. "I flashed him my charming personality."

"You're not getting off that easy. I'm incredibly angry at you and I want to know if you sacrificed anyone else you know to buy us time."

That turned Han's head, and he looked at her, not sure what expression to expect from her. When he saw her though, her face was angry - angry clear through. If she'd ever been serious in her life, this was it. Han rubbed his hand over his chin as he studied her, but she didn't even blink.

"I didn't sell anyone off," he said, almost sullen, looking back to his board.

"Anyone else," Leia corrected.

"Right. Anyone else."

"So what did you give him?"

Han looked at her sideways, opened his mouth, closed it again, and shook his head. As he did, Leia caught the way his right hand slid minutely over the control panel. It was, she realized, a caress. "You gave him the Falcon?"

The ship lifted off the ground with a slight bump. "No. She's security. I gave him one hundred thousand credits."

Leia gaped for a moment. "You have that kind of money?"

An ironic and humorless smile slid onto Han's face. "No, I don't." The look on Leia's face went stony and he held a finger up. "I'm not going to hand you in, if that's what you're worried about. Half that money went to buy you back."

"If you're looking for gratitude you're going to be waiting a while."

He struggled to hold his temper. "Look, shut up okay? Just -- shut up."

"Give me one reason why I should."

Han glared at her as he piloted the Falcon into free space and turned the hyperdrive on. "Because if you don't shut up I'll be forced to tell everyone back on base that you and I had several wild nights of passion while we were alone on this trip."

Leia stared at him. "You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?" he asked, and Leia rethought her statement. Of course he would.

"It'll be your word against mine," she said.

"And my version is much more interesting, Mrs. Solo."

Leia shut up, and Han, with a satisfied grin, tossed a switch and pushed the Falcon into hyperspace.

end

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